

THE COMEDY OF DAVE CHAPPELLE

CRITICAL ESSAYS

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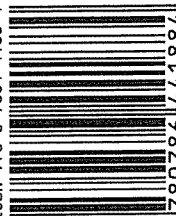
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On the cover: Dave Chappelle in a publicity shot for the second season of *Chappelle's Show*, 2004 (Comedy Central/Photofest)

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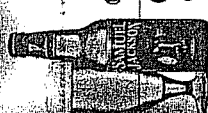
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Perhaps best known for his highly acclaimed, short-lived Comedy Central program *Chappelle's Show*, Dave Chappelle is widely regarded as one of today's most culturally significant comedians. Through the sketch comedy show and his stand-up act, Chappelle has offered truly memorable commentary on racial and ethnic tensions in American society. This book assembles 13 essays that examine motifs common in Chappelle's comedy, including technology and digital culture; race, gender, and ethnicity; economics and politics; music, television, film, and performance; and memory, language, and identity.

WISNIEWSKI

THE COMEDY OF DAVE CHAPPELLE

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the parallax view of self. By situating this discussion within the wider context of celebrity culture, this article will conclude regarding the cultural relevance of these conceptions of identity to today's entertainment industry and contemporary society more generally.

6 Impersonating Hollywood

The Conflicting Identity Discourses of Charlie Murphy's True Hollywood Stories

JULIA ROUND

Charlie Murphy's True Hollywood Stories are possibly the best known of all the sketches featured on *Chappelle's Show*.¹ Indeed, it might be too popular — at a stand-up performance in Sacramento Memorial Auditorium in 2004, Dave Chappelle stormed off the stage for nearly two minutes after the crowd wouldn't stop shouting "I'm Rick James, bitch!" at him. On his return the frustrated comedian blamed the audience, who wouldn't "shut up and listen — like you're supposed to." Chappelle declared, "The show is ruining my life" — by making him a "star." He continued, "This [stand-up] is the most important thing I do, and because I'm on TV, you make it hard for me to do it. People can't distinguish between what's real and fake. This ain't a TV show. You're not watching Comedy Central. I'm real up here talking.² Although Chappelle's stand-up routine and his television sketches are both performances, the comedian draws a distinction between the two according to their performance context, naming one more "real" than the other. This article will address this notion by using the television broadcasts of Charlie Murphy's True Hollywood Stories to discuss the formation of identity and the veracity of the same in contemporary culture, with particular reference to notions of celebrity as discussed in the work of Richard Dyer.

This chapter will initially consider the effect of the multiple contexts used by the True Hollywood Stories (interview, monologue, sketches and so forth) on the production of identity. To do so, it establishes a working model of the discursive construction of the self and applies the same to the concept and workings of the True Hollywood Stories. It then proceeds to case studies of the broadcast material and examines the ways in which the True Hollywood Stories illustrate such philosophical notions as identity discourse and

Identity Discourse, Parallax and the Construction of the Self

The Socratic and Platonic notion of the soul as the incorporeal, eternal essence of a person is the basis for the notion of an inherent, constant self. This view may be categorized as a type of essentialism (a doctrine that says material objects have an essence distinguishable from their attributes and existence) and defines the self as unified and constant. However, contemporary and postmodern viewpoints deviate widely from essentialism and many now define the self as fluid and entirely changeable; no more than a performance that is chosen according to the situation. This view is common to multiple disciplines that include philosophy (David Hume denies the distinction between the self and constantly changing emotional responses), literary studies (Judith Butler's work on performative gender), cultural studies (Jean Baudrillard and simulacra), linguistic studies (discourse analysis) and religious studies (for example Buddhism), to name but a few. Cultural criticism also emphasizes the role of perception in identity construction; for example Stuart Hall comments, "If we feel that we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or 'narrative of the self' about ourselves."³

Contemporary thought therefore struggles to reconcile the traditional understanding of the constant self with the variable nature of personality traits. However, these conflicting perspectives may be integrated to some degree by the theories of Slavoj Žižek. Žižek's seminal work *The Parallax View* relates the scientific notion of parallax to a variety of debates, including the ontological, the religious, and the political.⁴ Parallax is defined as an apparent change in the position of an object that is actually caused by a change in the position of the observer. Our viewpoint of the moon, for example, is parallaxic, as its changes of shape are also due to alterations in the position of the Earth with respect to the sun.

Žižek theorizes that this standard definition of parallax is applicable in a metaphorical sense as well as a purely physical one, stating that an awareness of one's self or position changes being itself; for example, as in politics, when the passive working class become the active revolutionaries.⁵ He relates the concept to the notion of self, defining parallax as "this gap which separates the one from itself."⁶ This enables him to argue that the self exists as both eternal and mutable, as "one and the same element in two different

spaces," and the distinction between the two depends solely on the observational position.⁷ Žižek also extends this theory to notions such as the real (as the opposite of semblance or appearance) and truth (which can then be defined as both an inherent quality and relative concept). He thereby "proves" their existence, not simply as inaccessible things but as having a dual status via this gap in perception.⁸ In this way both the eternal and the mutable viewpoints are simultaneously validated.

Although this might appear to be the philosophical equivalent of having one's cake and eating it, it provides a rational basis for theories such as solipsism, according to which only the mind can definitively be said to exist. This is, of course, an extreme standpoint. However, the parallax view validates the notion of 'reality' as both produced by the mind (as all experience is necessarily mediated by our senses) and as having an objective existence (as even contradictory interpretations of events prove the external reality of the events themselves as source material). Both notions are one and the same thing, just approached from a different standpoint.

Less radical contemporary thought in this area uses the notion of discourse to argue that the construction of any reality is selective. Discourse here is defined as a system of options from which language users make their choice. Many contemporary theorists now view notions such as identity as discursively constructed: that is, our identity is formed through a series of choices we make every day. This process constitutes identity discourse, and theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida and Ludwig Wittgenstein have explored the notion of discursive thought and language.

In this way "philosophers and cultural studies writers have questioned the assumption that identity is a fixed 'thing' that we possess. Identity, it is argued, is not best understood as an entity but as an emotionally charged description of ourselves."⁹ It is fluid, and constructed according to the specific context we find ourselves in. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the context of celebrity, where identity is both the symptom and product of the media.

Cultural discourse analysis therefore adopts a non-essentialist view of truth and meaning. It states that meaning in language is "generated through the relations of difference between signs and that, as a consequence, language cannot produce truth as a correspondence of the word-world relationship."¹⁰ Essentially, it employs an anti-representationalist understanding of language, denying that language refers to an independent object. For Barker and Galasiński, "[l]anguage 'makes' rather than 'finds'; representation does not 'picture' the world but constitutes it."¹¹ Nowhere is this more apparent than in the context of an anecdote, where the layers of language that constitute the real are at their most opaque and apparent.

This article therefore proposes a model of discursive identity that uses the parallax terminology to posit a perceived coexistence of both types of self. It seems that the notion of an essential self may well be defined as a fiction constructed from a very selective narrative of one's life, where events that do not fit are ignored. However, this does not belie the essential self's perceived existence. This is because if one perceives oneself a certain way then this will color one's actions with reference to the changeable self. In this way, the essential self does effectively exist, albeit as a parallax version of the changeable self, and vice versa.

The significant elements of this critical model are, therefore, self-perception and discursive production, which qualities bring into being the parallax self: as both constant and mutable. A changing perspective creates the parallax gap (whether this is achieved through an awareness of self, the subsequent nature of events, or different audience positions). Identity is constructed through discourse, which is adapted according to context: including events, circumstances, relationships and so forth. Since celebrity anecdotes may constitute the most appropriate examples for cultural discourse analysis, as suggested above, this article will now apply this model to the structure and content of Charlie Murphy's *True Hollywood Stories*.

Charlie Murphy's True Hollywood Stories

The first of Charlie Murphy's *True Hollywood Stories* was broadcast in 2004 as part of Season Two of *Chappelle's Show* (Season Two; Episode 4). Following record sales of the Season One DVD,¹² the show was at the height of its fame at this time, and the segment was an instant hit. In fact it might have been too popular; Chappelle quit the show midway through production of the third series, despite the lure of vast amounts of cash and a contract that gave him the freedom to engage in as many side projects as he wanted. Although he cited artistic differences for this, the legacy of Charlie Murphy's *True Hollywood Stories* was certainly affecting his other work, as noted.

It is the production of the *True Hollywood Stories* that make them particularly interesting. The segments are collages made up of Charlie's monologue to camera, re-enactments of the events and (in the case of Rick James) interview footage with the star himself. In these dramatized skits, Chappelle impersonates Rick James and Prince, while Charlie Murphy plays himself and incidental characters are played by stock actors.¹³ Multiple narrative forms such as dramatization, monologue, and interview are used, alongside a variety of techniques including impersonation, special effects, authenticity claims, and pastiche. These combinations produce plural — and often contradictory — subject positions for the characters involved. The segments also invoke

multiple levels of audience as, although they were pre-recorded, they were played back in front of a studio audience, whose laughter is incorporated into the broadcast received by home viewers.

Each of the production styles used (such as monologue, interview, or sketch) has its own truth status and generic conventions and expectations. As such, the True Hollywood Stories may be defined as a discursive production, as discourse is a system of options from which language users make their choices. Both the events and the language used are key to their representation of reality. That they have been consciously scripted and selected to create a particular effect does not make analysis any less valid. This in fact might make them more relevant to the construction of celebrity, if this phenomenon is viewed as the deliberate manipulation of image — Dyer notes that the “real” identity of the star is just as produced as their various roles.¹⁴ It should also be remembered that Chappelle apparently improvised many of the asides and catchphrases used.

The title initially sets up the truth claim of the entire story, although it is worth noting it is also somewhat paradoxical by combining the words “true,” “Hollywood,” and “stories.” It opens with Charlie Murphy’s monologue (although he is talking to a person behind camera their responses aren’t heard), which, as a form of address, contains inherent truth-value. This is backed up by its content: Charlie frequently demands to be believed and makes comments such as “I’m not bullshitting, man,” “Who the fuck could make up that shit?” and “Trust me.” Rhetoric, repetition, and visual reinforcement are also used; at the climax of the Prince sketch, Charlie confronts the audience(s),¹⁵ demanding, “You don’t believe me? You think I’m making it up?” He then continues, “After it was all over he took us in the house and served us pancakes. [Pauses, nods, and reaffirms the line.] Pancakes.” The pause, definitive nod of the head, and deadpan delivery stress the truth claim as Charlie stares down the camera, daring us to disbelieve him.

The interview format also has a high truth-value. Although the broadcast content of Rick James’s interview has necessarily been selected in order to support the story, it is in fact largely representative of the uncut content. Although Rick disagrees on specifics and denies certain elements of the stories (“He may have smacked me, but there weren’t no tears coming out of my eyes”), overall his version accords with Charlie’s. Rick even verifies the Prince anecdote, saying, “There’s a story that goes around in Hollywood to this day about this basketball game that went down. About this short androgynous skirt high-heeled fishnet-stocking going ‘ooh ooh’ wannabe-man type human being, and Charlie and him playing at basketball.... Do you know this little thing beat Charlie and them in high-heeled stilettos.”¹⁶

The two formats of monologue and interview both have strong truth-

claim status at multiple levels. This is present in both the speakers’ tones (Charlie and Rick both raise their voices at various points) and content (such as Charlie’s demands to be believed, Rick’s concession that the two of them used to play-fight “a lot,” and the overall corroboration of the two stories). The visual style used also supports such an interpretation as both appear in front of plain backgrounds and in close-up, giving the impression of letting the story speak for itself.

By contrast, the reenactment of the events is self-consciously comedic. It uses various tactics and genre conventions to defamiliarize and to exaggerate events for comedy effect. These include literality, juxtaposition, use of inappropriate genre conventions such as slow-motion replays or emotive music, exaggeration, and repetition.

The following case studies will consider specific examples of how the over-hyped fictional status of the dramatization contrasts with the truth-centered structure of the monologues and the ways in which this opposition informs a discursive view of constructed identity. This is obvious in the way in which minor contradictions are absorbed into the kind of “narrative of the self” that Stuart Hall identifies. For example, the full Rick James interview includes his statement that the ring he wore to punch Charlie was not his “Unity” ring (as Charlie claims), but another one. However, the broadcast clip only shows Rick pointing to his bedecked hand and saying “and this was imprinted in that black head of his for at least a week.”

In this instance, we can see how the multiple subject position of the audience also affects the perception of the stories. At the widest level is the audience for the DVD sales, who have access to all the extras, interview footage, and so forth. There is also the at-home audience for the television broadcast as an event, and the studio audience for that evening, who provided the live laugh track as the pre-recorded segments were aired. There also exists an implicit audience for the filming of the segments, which includes the interviewers. Finally, there is also the implied audience of the original tapes, which Chappelle states were told “at lunchtime” in a different, informal context. As noted in my theoretical discussion of parallax, it is achieved through a difference of perspective, and, therefore, these multiple positions are integral to the creation of differing versions. Different audiences have access to different levels of information, for example as illustrated by the ring anecdote, and, therefore, will perceive the truth value and personalities of the people involved in the story differently. In this way, the competing nature of these versions seems to inform a parallax view of self. An identity discourse is thereby created through the coexistence of competing versions, and this article now considers some of the specific ways in which this is achieved.

Case Study: "I'm Rick James"¹⁶

The sketches used in the True Hollywood Stories rely on various tactics to achieve comedy, and I will now analyze some of these and explore the other effects they have on identity discourse. Literality is used frequently: Charlie Murphy comments that, when he met Rick James, "I seen like an orange, his aura or whatever, I seen it. It was orange." We are then shown a clip of Chappelle dressed as Rick James (with long braided hair sporting silver beads and wearing an animal print top) in front of an orange glow (presumably created through lighting effects and a colored background), looking into the camera and beckoning us towards him.

The construction of this image, while adhering literally to Charlie's words, also undermines them by exaggerating his description and aping a divinity that is somewhat at odds with our understanding of Rick James as a funk singer. It may be this that produces the laugh with which the studio audience responds, although it may also be that their amusement stems from this first glimpse of Chappelle dressed in such an outrageous manner.

Chappelle's engagement with the camera has the effect of flattening all the various audiences into one, as he is directly addressing the camera-as-audience (while filming), the studio audience and the at-home audience (who are both watching the clip). However, the laugh included in the broadcast has the effect of separating the three audiences again, since only the at-home audience will experience it as part of the sketch. In this sense, the audience(s) exist in a parallactic relationship; simultaneously both merged into one through the experience of being directly addressed, and segregated due to the (non-)inclusion of the laugh.

Juxtaposition is also used for comedic effect, as the outrageous sits alongside the realistic. This is most obvious in the characterization; although Chappelle's impersonation of Rick James initially seems exaggerated for comedic effect, the evidence seems to state otherwise. Chappelle states that "most of the Rick stuff was ad-libbed," but, notwithstanding this, a lot of the phrases are accurate and on the DVD commentary Chappelle reveals that he had met Rick on a few occasions. At another point in the commentary, director Neal Brennan asks, "Did anyone tell you Rick used to say 'celebration'?" After Chappelle responds in the negative, Brennan continues: "Apparently Rick used to say 'celebration' all the time. I went to Rick's funeral with Charlie and on the front cover it said, 'A Celebration.'" Similarly, the now-infamous catchphrase "I'm Rick James, bitch" has an authentic basis although it was actually created only as an afterthought for the show's "To be continued" shot. Chappelle notes that "Rick actually used to say that ... it just became the thrust of my impression."¹⁷

Events in the skits have a similar status; the implausible is in fact correct. Near the beginning of the Studio 54 sketch, Chappelle (as Rick) licks a girl's face. Again, this seems excessive; but Charlie confirms he witnessed similar events. He is incredulous: "It was none of the things you would think would happen if a black man ... walks up to a white woman and licks the whole side of her face and calls her a bitch." Rick also confirms that "I did a lot of licking of girls' faces ... [but] I'd always pick out somebody I knew ... so I fooled his ass."¹⁸

Depending on perspective, then, both the linguistic and dramatic constructions of Rick's idiosyncrasies have a dual status as both true and false. On the one hand, the phrasing (such as "celebration") is improvised and based on no actual knowledge; on the other, however, it accords exactly with Rick's reputation and, uncannily, even aligns with certain quoted words of his. Similarly, unlikely events such as licking girls' faces, not only happened, but also are actually rationalized by Rick James's extra information. In this way the notion of truth also becomes parallactic.

Genre conventions are also used for comedic effect, for example, in Charlie's confrontation of Rick in his hotel room. After Charlie kicks Chappelle, a slow motion replay of the kung fu kick is shown from a side angle. Chappelle then summons security. At this point dramatic music is played and Chappelle declaims, "Now, Darkness, the tables have turned! [To security guards] Do with him whatever you like!" The use of inappropriate genre conventions adds comedic effect, for example by making Charlie's kick into one to rival Bruce Lee's. It also fictionalizes the events by invoking genre expectations, for example, that of a kung-fu movie and its associated excess in special effects.

This process is continued in the second Rick James sketch, in which Rick deliberately damages Eddie Murphy's expensive new couch. Chappelle's frantic grinding of his feet into the couch, along with his shouts of "Fuck yo' couch, nigger!" and "Buy a new one you rich motherfucker!" are clearly an exaggeration of the actual event. Similarly, after receiving a beating from the Murphy brothers, an apparently crippled Chappelle drags himself out of the room on his elbows. This also uses genre convention in a similar manner to the above, as emotive music is played as he crawls out while sobbing further insults.

However, in some senses the excess is in fact merely a literal representation of the truth claim of the story, as Charlie Murphy's voiceover states that after the beating Rick's legs were "like linguini." We are then shown Chappelle's battered, flattened legs as he drags himself out. As before, literality is used for comedic effect, which again results in a parallactic scene where literalized events can therefore be defined as both accurate and fictional.

The truth-value of the anecdote as a whole is treated similarly, as Rick's motivation was indeed that Eddie was a "rich motherfucker." Ridiculous though the story seems, Rick's interview again confirms the events as he concedes, "Yeah I remember grinding my feet into Eddie's couch" and, when asked "Do you remember why you did it?" he replies, "Because Eddie could buy another one." This explanation is also born out by external sources; for example, Rick's funeral instructions, which he had drawn up years before his death and given to his children with the emphatic statement: "And then call Eddie Murphy and tell that rich muther to pay for it."¹⁹

However, the Chappelle Show does not use this portion of the interview, preferring instead to show Rick contradicting himself for comedic effect. Of the following complete statement, the italicized words were the only ones broadcast:

And I bet it was something like, uh, Eddie or Charlie or somebody did it to my couch. *See I never just did things just to do them. C'mon, I mean what am I going to do, just all of a sudden just jump up and grind my feet into someone's couch like it was something to do? C'mon, I got a little more sense than that. Yeah I remember grinding my feet in Eddie's couch, you know. It was probably a dare from Charlie and I wouldn't do it.*²⁰

Truncated in this way, the broadcast section seems contradictory. However, despite the confused syntax it seems clear that what Rick is actually trying to say is that he would have had a reason for ruining the couch, rather than simply doing it on a whim.

The truncated statement is rewound and played back as part of the segment, which technique emphasizes its inconsistency. The same technique is used with Rick James's statement "Cocaine is a hell of a drug," which appears in this sketch four times. Brennan and Chappelle point to the role of the audience in these decisions, saying that when the rough cut of the sketch was shown to a test audience with the phrases only played once, people only "sort of thought they heard it."²¹ Therefore, repetition is not just used for comedic effect but for emphasis. However, this creates a different effect: repeating the statement makes Rick's comment sound like an excuse rather than the aside it actually is. It also emphasizes the role of this drug and in so doing undermines the reliability of Rick's side of the story still further.

The monologues are edited for broadcast so that no such suspicion attaches to Charlie Murphy, despite the fact that his uncut interview contains similar content. As Charlie himself says, "Whatever was available for Eddie Murphy, on the dark side, I got all of it.... Millions of chicks, kilos of blow, bales of weed." Rick is less subtle in his assessment of Charlie's reliability,

saying in his interview (also not broadcast): "Charlie, he has a very short-term memory bank. You know, all the cocaine we did in the eighties, and drinking, has got to him, it's got to him, he's got like two brain cells left. He's a liar, Charlie's lying like a Persian rug."²² The point is somewhat moot since, not only do both men agree that the event took place, but there is also validation (albeit second-hand) from a sober source: Eddie Murphy, who "pointed out it was a red couch, and Rick was wearing Capezio's." Again, we can see a simultaneous validation (of the events that took place) and denial (of the image offered to us), which illustrates the idea of truth as a paradox.

The third of the sketches suffers from none of these problems of verification, as it opens with Rick's statement: "I heard him [Charlie] tell a story that he came into the China Club one time and I was behind the bar. Now this is true." The tale continues as Rick slaps Charlie without provocation, and Charlie responds in kind. Again, the slow motion replay is used for laughs as Chappelle (as Rick) slaps Charlie. However, this time the humor also derives from the fact that the "replay" is in fact separate footage that is exaggerated for effect; in delivering the "replay" slap Chappelle spins round in a full circle, so fast his hat falls off. This use of replay has in fact also been the subject of other sketches on the show. The first episode of the second season includes a sketch called "Everything Looks Better in Slow Motion." In this, various scenarios are played out, before an alleged slow motion replay (actually a re-filmed version of the sketch in question) is shown.

After the replay, Charlie elaborates, "I came down on it like this, and his extensions was flying all over the place." We then cut to Rick, who sternly says, "That is absurd!" This response could again be considered contradictory (since he has previously validated the whole tale) — but, taken in its entirety, Rick's statement is, of course, a little less definitive:

Now, Charlie tells it like, after I did that, that he tells me to come over and he smacked me and tears start coming out of my eyes. *Now that is absurd!* What, I'm gonna cry, now? He may have smacked me, but there weren't no tears coming out of my eyes...²³

The sketch continues as Charlie explains that Rick "totally, really, for-got" that he had previously slapped him. In Charlie's uncut monologue, however, he expands on this notion, saying, "Rick would be so fucking high, when he was doing a lot of these things, that when he received these beat-downs, he probably don't even remember getting them.... An ass-whipping is kinda hard to accept, so he probably was in denial, y'know, and blacked it out." Although this statement accords with Rick's (uncut) comments above, it also implies that both men might be in denial as to some elements of the story. Rick undermines Charlie's description of the karate kick in the hotel

room in a similar manner, pointing to Charlie's cocaine use, and also saying,

He didn't even know nothing about karate in those days. Why you think Charlie Murphy is taking karate right now? Cos Charlie Murphy could not fight.... Don't you think Charlie's a little old to be taking karate? He's probably taking it with the little kids.²⁴

This returns us to Stuart Hall's notion of the "comforting narrative" we construct for ourselves.

Discourse analysis

The above points illustrate some of the ways in which the True Hollywood Stories offer conflicting truth claims, and the ways in which the resulting multiplicity of the segments can be considered as parallax. In *Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis*, Barker and Galasiński use discourse analysis techniques to deconstruct conversation and demonstrate how the discursive construction of cultural forms takes place.²⁵ Their thesis is that "[w]e cannot have an identity, rather we are a series of descriptions in language."²⁶ Although they note that discourse analysis is not appropriate for edited, constructed language, the ad-libbed nature of much of Chappelle's impression goes some way to circumnavigating this restriction. Furthermore, as long as we retain an awareness of the constructed nature of the rest of the dialogue used, it may be that we can nonetheless use discourse analysis to identify the effect of the language used, even if we must then acknowledge that this effect is artificially constructed.

Although space does not permit a full discussion, discourse analysis allows for statements to be deconstructed at various levels, including the lexico-grammatical,²⁷ vocabulary, and interpersonal function. This last includes such elements as mood, metalanguage, modality (that is, the speaker's attitude towards the propositions/utterance), and forms of address. Other elements such as social interaction, control and textual function (cohesion between comments, theme/rheme structure, and information structure) should also be considered.

A good example of an improvised statement made by Chappelle (as Rick) might be his comment. "I wish I had four hands so I could give those titties four thumbs down."²⁸ The lexico-grammatical level of this statement delineates it as a mental clause, through use of the term "I wish." It is not, therefore, an obviously active or passive statement. Its vocabulary uses slang ("titties") and invokes excess ("four hands"). At the interpersonal level the statement's modality is disparaging, but also humorous — not only

at a visual level but also because it debunks the listener's assumptions as to why the speaker might want four hands (not to grope, but instead to reject). The social interaction value of this statement revolves around a power play.

The overall lexico-grammatical effect of the True Hollywood Stories comes from material clauses. This reduces the truth-value of the stories and makes them more personal and anecdotal. It might also be said that this is backed up by the focus on naming: Chappelle (as Rick) acknowledges Charlie with a "Charlie Murphy!" as often as possible and also refers to him in this way in mid-conversation ("Bitches! Show Charlie Murphy your titties!") The over-used catchphrase "I'm Rick James, bitch!" again allows naming to dominate, and emphasizes this further through the addition of the word "bitch," which both derides the addressee and renders them anonymous.

At the lexico-grammatical level, "I'm Rick James, bitch!" is an existential statement. The vocabulary, again, is profane. The interpersonal level includes a modality that focuses on the speaker's superiority, and a disparaging mode of address. At the level of social interaction, again, the statement is all about control. Also, there is no textual function; it is an empty statement, devoid of content, which is only emphasized by its repetition. This also creates humor when the statement is reversed — as when we hear Chappelle relating a story that begins "So I said look, bitch, I'm Rick James."

The vocabulary used in the dialogue — and monologue — is also very visually descriptive. For example, when Rick summons security to his hotel room, Charlie narrates, "The one in the front he had crooked eyes. One eye was looking at me and the other one was looking at Rick." Neal Brennan confirms, "Charlie's obviously a great storyteller anyway, but they're the most cinematic, visual stories you've ever seen." Dave Chappelle backs this up, saying, "Charlie Murphy, what you see in this is what you get. If you ever meet Charlie Murphy, you're not gonna meet anybody different than what you see right here"²⁹ (my emphases).

Both these statements align the visual with veracity, a strategy common to postmodern narratives. Mark Currie's narratological model is relevant here; Currie proposes that narrative founds identity in that we construe our identity against that of others, via difference, and externalize our conception of it by using narrative methods; by telling our own story.³⁰ Further, he raises the question of view, of vision, commenting on the "tension between seeing and writing ... in contemporary narratology" since seeing overrules the authority of verbal narrative.³¹ Although the reconstructions used in the True Hollywood Stories are patently false, the visuals of the language used in their dialogue and Charlie's narration supports this theory.

Case Study: "The Shirts Against the Blouses"

The final True Hollywood Story broadcast refers to an encounter in which the singer Prince and his fellow artists the Revolution beat the Murphys and their friends at a game of basketball, after which Prince made them all pancakes (Season Two; Episode 5). The juxtaposition of the banal and exotic is one of the major sources of humor in this sketch. However, it also comes from the contrast between the public and private persona of Prince, an opposition that again relates to parallax as regards the construction of celebrity.

Prince is a notoriously private artist and his ongoing attempts to control his own name and image have been directed not only at corporations but even at his fans. In 2007, he announced that he was going to sue the websites YouTube and eBay for unauthorized use of music and film content. Disputed instances included a home movie of a thirteen-month-old boy dancing in the family kitchen while "Let's Go Crazy" is played on a stereo in the background. Prince also demanded that fan sites and communities ceased reproducing any artwork with his likeness, including "photographs of their Prince inspired tattoos and their vehicles displaying Prince inspired license plates."³²

As such, Prince's public image is heavily controlled while his private life is closely guarded. Chappelle's impersonation thereby relies heavily on public perception of the star's persona. He and the Revolution play basketball in the same clothes and high heels they wear on stage, and Chappelle dances his way through the recreated basketball game, even letting out the occasional high-pitched squeal in imitation of the artist's singing style. This contrasts with the serious, sporting comments he makes in baritone ("Good hustle"). Similarly, in response to Charlie's request for a towel halfway through the game, Chappelle responds, "Why don't you purify yourself in the waters of Lake Minnetonka?" Again, this is lifted from the public sphere as the line features in *Purple Rain*. Overall, Prince's public persona is incongruously transplanted in order to fill the gap of information that represents his private persona, and this results in comedy.

This is most obvious in the final scene, where Chappelle (as Prince) makes pancakes for everyone and gazes into the camera while holding a frying pan. Although Charlie Murphy's monologue states that "he made us all pancakes," it is not clear whether this means that Prince did the actual cooking. Certainly it seems unlikely that Prince would have stood and served them all in the subservient manner depicted onscreen, or that he would have done so in a manner so reminiscent of his stage presence, as when he lets out a moan while gazing at the camera. Again, the public is resituated in the private space and, like Rick James's orange aura, a literal visual interpretation of the narrative is used for comedy.

Unlike the Rick James segments, the Prince story doesn't contain an interview with the artist, but Prince has confirmed the story in an interview with MTV, saying, "the whopping is true" (although he denies the high heels).³³ As noted, the unbroadcast section of the Rick James interview also confirms this story as public knowledge. There is also independent truth-value as Prince was a basketball player in high school; the *Star Tribune* published an article in 2004 that includes comments from his sophomore basketball coach and physical education teacher, Al Nuness, stating that "Prince was a darn good basketball player."³⁴

In this sense, then, the public and private personas of Prince are paralytic — our view of the artist changes depending on how much information we have. Seemingly contradictory elements such as his basketball skills are incorporated in this way, and rationalized. In conclusion, this article will consider how this process informs our understanding of the construction of celebrity and star culture.

Celebrity Culture

The celebrity figure seems to most obviously represent the notion of self as performance that this article seeks to explore. At the start of this chapter, I noted Chappelle's use of the words "I'm real" to contrast his live stand-up with his Comedy Central shows. In the past, Hollywood has only promoted the screen personas of its stars: for example, Cary Grant as the virile, charismatic and debonair leading man, with little being known about the personality of Archibald Alexander Leach (his real name). However, the contemporary construction of the star persona has made the personal lives of celebrities more and more open to the public. The plethora of reality shows that have emerged since *The Osbournes* are the most obvious examples of this, and the "real" star, who had previously been untouchable and unknowable, has become more accessible via celebrity culture.

Richard Dyer has written extensively on the subject, exploring the connection between the audience and the constructed star image. He attributes this development to the notion that "people increasingly wanted to take pleasure in people like themselves, realities like their own" and continues that one index of this trend's development "is the demystification of stars, no longer seen as special people but just like you and me."³⁵ Dyer also notes that, although the audience is aware the star persona is an appearance, "the whole media construction of stars encourages us to think in terms of 'really.'"³⁶ Tabloid publicity relies on the notion that "in its apparent or actual escape from the image that Hollywood is trying to promote, it seems more 'authentic.'"³⁷ It is thus often taken to give a privileged access to the real person of

the star. It is also the place where one can read tensions between the star-as-person and her/his image, tensions which at another level become themselves crucial to the image.³⁸ The nature of publicity means that, despite appearances, it follows that the notion of the "real" identity of a star is just as much produced as their characters and roles.³⁹

Dyer continues to explore the analogy between life and drama, a notion used from Plato onwards, and which informs the discussion of identity with which this article began. Life is where people, like actors, play parts. Dyer therefore concludes that we

have two distinct conceptions of what we are, of our "selves." On the one hand, we can believe in "the existence of a knowable and constant self," which is theoretically distinct from the social roles we have to play and the ways we have of presenting our "personality" to others. On the other hand, as [Elizabeth] Burns stresses [in *Theatricality*], there is increasing anxiety about the validity of this autonomous, separate identity — we may only be our "performance," the way in which we take on the various socially defined modes of behaviour that our culture makes available.⁴⁰

In this sense the construction of the celebrity in contemporary culture most obviously epitomizes the struggle for reconciliation between the inherent self and the self-as-performance. As the audience now demands — and gets — to see the star in both their public and private spheres, this structure seems to imply that even the inherent, essential self (the 'private') is performative. As P.D. Marshall states, "The celebrity sign effectively contains this tension between authentic and false cultural value. In its simultaneous embodiment of media construction, audience construction, and the real, living and breathing human being, the celebrity sign negotiates the competing and contradictory definitions of its own significance.... The power of the celebrity, then, is to represent the active construction of identity in the social world."⁴¹

This echoes the viewpoint of cultural discourse analysis. Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasiński define this contrast as being "between an eternal meta-physical self and a contingent linguistic self."⁴² The result is multiple narratives of self due to different relationships, contexts and sites of interaction. The multiple formats used by the True Hollywood Stories illustrate this process by offering conflicting and contradictory truth claims that nonetheless exist within a coherent whole.

Conclusion

This chapter has tried to show how the notion of parallax can reconcile conflicting interpretations of the construction of identity. The self, and par-

ticularly the celebrity self, can be viewed as parallactic as it includes an "an awareness of the split between self-image and its commodified dissemination." Although the notion of self presupposes a "synthetic unity," "this unity is also the irreducible gap that emerges between the production of the self and its consumption, between the apprehension of the self and its representation in photographs and records."⁴³

The fact that so many elements of Dave Chappelle's impersonation have been adopted and merged with the "real" Rick James supports this notion of simultaneous unity and gap between the real/authentic self, and performed/changeable self. For example, the online "Rick James Soundboard" shows a central picture of Rick alongside smaller pictures of Chappelle, but the sound-bites it contains are all from *Chappelle's Show*. In fact, except for Rick's now infamous "Cocaine's a hell of a drug" quote, all are actually Chappelle's voice!⁴⁴ A teaser trailer shown briefly online for the 2007 Rick James movie (entitled *I'm Rick James* — a title that again references *Chappelle's Show*) also cut together the show's sketch footage with real-life footage of Rick. In this sense, Chappelle's identity claim ("I'm Rick James, bitch!") has indeed been fulfilled, albeit to the detriment of his other work, as noted.

The Charlie Murphy sketches make the distinction between "real" and "inauthentic" self a literal one by providing representations of both Rick James and Prince that are obviously false in many respects. However, using strategies such as literality, juxtaposition, genre conventions, editing and replay, the absurdities of these depictions are simultaneously validated. Multiple audience positions also contribute to this process and expose the notion of an authenticity that distinguishes between the public and private persona as a false one, attributable instead to parallax.

By smoothing over minor contradictions between competing versions of events into a coherent narrative, the editing of the True Hollywood Stories demonstrates the mediating processes of the discursively constructed self. In so doing, Chappelle's show redefines not just the notion of self but also the notion of truth as parallactic. The current "access all areas" approach to celebrity culture allows the notion of a star persona to exemplify the perceived divide between private/essential self and public/performed self, as both are constructed. Identity discourse that seeks to explore and rationalize the coexistence of the essential and performed self is, therefore, aided by Žižek's parallax view, and the True Hollywood Stories epitomize this process.